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CIA-Academic Link Is in National Interest

It probably is better news for the nation and the Central Intelligence Agency than for the academic community that the CIA is strengthening the ties with U.S. campuses, ties all but severed 20 years ago.

Two decades back the Vietnam war made the CIA — and most other government agencies — “persona non grata” at most universities, says Robert Gates, deputy director of intelligence for the agency and the man whose specific goal is to get help from “the best minds in the country.”

Gates credits Stansfield Turner, CIA director during the Carter administration, with beginning the effort to restore relations with scholars. The trend has accelerated: In the past two years the intelligence agency and universities have joined forces in about 75 conferences a year involving their own people and outside experts in subjects of interest to both. Also resumed are the wide use of scholars to review agency intelligence estimates, a few contracts each year for research papers on particular topics, and one-year terms as scholars in residence at CIA headquarters in Langley for experts who get leave from their institutions.

“What we are after,” Gates explains, “is people who will challenge us constructively, offer us a different perspective, who will stir up the pot a bit and help us consider all points of view, particularly the unorthodox.” A review of past intelligence fiascos, particularly that in the 1970s of failing to recognize the shaky position of the shah of Iran, prompted the new emphasis on seeking outside viewpoints, he said.

The CIA has relaxed somewhat its rules on what the scholars it pays for specific research may do with the results. They must still obtain permis-

sion to publish articles or books on their sponsored studies, and cannot acknowledge CIA support in the publication, but where their universities require it may inform their superiors of the details of their CIA contracts. (A controversy at Harvard late last year over CIA funding for a confer-

ence on Islamic fundamentalism mainly revolved around the failure of the professor who headed the conference to tell his superiors of the agency's participation.) Requirements for pre-publication review of the writings can be waived if the research itself does not involve classified information.

Gates says public disclosure that the CIA was paying for research on a specific topic could adversely influence events abroad. If a contract involved study of the shaky financial stability of a particular country, he said, international lending institutions might become nervous and make the situation worse.

Some of the distaste of academic leaders for reviving links with the CIA arises from their disapproval of the agency's operational activities. Any academician who takes part in those missions does so at his own risk, and outside the bounds of scholarship. The gathering of intelligence itself, however, is a legitimate, necessary function of government: At this stage of the 20th century even the most fastidious of statesmen cannot afford Henry L. Stimson's disdainful dismissal, in the 1920s, of code-breaking because “gentlemen do not read each other's mail.”

The specific criticism from some in Congress and academic circles is that CIA sponsorship of studies threatens the independence of research — the agency will demand or exert influence to achieve findings in

support of its pre-determined positions. Any university professor who got such an approach from the CIA would owe it to scholarship to reject the offer, and owe it to the nation to report it to the congressional Intelligence Oversight Committee.

The CIA's acknowledged problem is and has been inadequate information on matters vital to the national interest. That interest needs and should have all the help it can get, including that of scholars. Academe can be compromised thereby only insofar as there is a lack of scholarly integrity within its ranks.